

Doing Better for Families Australia

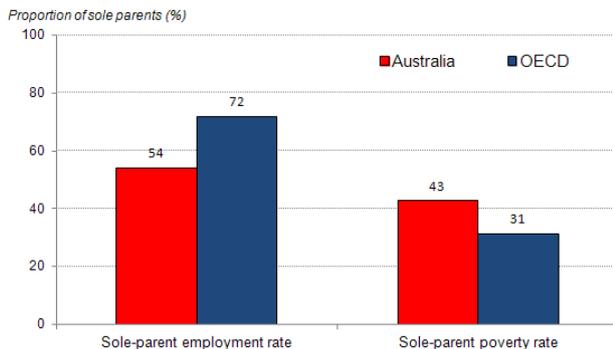
Australia does well for families and children but needs to do more to help sole parents find paid work

Australia performs well on a number of important outcomes of work-life balance: fertility (1.9 children per women) is above the OECD average (1.7) and close to the replacement rate (2.1), the female employment rate (66.2%) has been rising steadily since the 1960s and is now well above OECD average (59.6%), and the gender wage gap (12%) is below average (16%). Part-time work is an important feature among employed women. But unlike many other OECD countries, mothers often return to full-time work once their children reach schooling age. The recent introduction of paid maternity leave will further help parents to reconcile work and family commitments.

However, joblessness among sole parent families is a significant problem. While it has increased since the early 2000s, at just over 50% in 2009 the sole-parent employment rate is one of the lowest in the OECD, which contributes to an above average poverty rate for sole-parent families. This issue is of particular concern as around one in 5 children live in such households, and projections show that the number is likely to increase by 20% over the next 25 years.

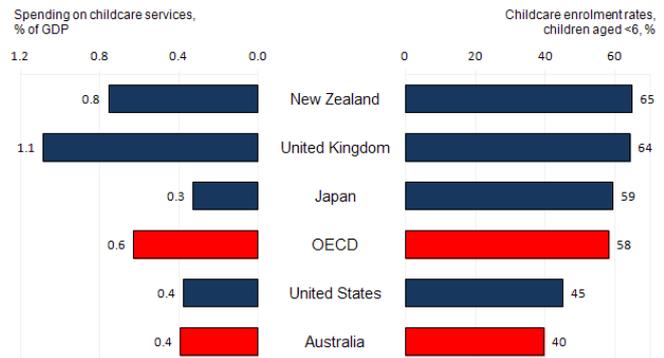
Most sole parents in Australia are unemployed, resulting in above average poverty rates

Sole parent employment and poverty rates



Despite above average social expenditure on families, spending on childcare services is relatively low

Public expenditure as a proportion of GDP and childcare enrolment



In the past, Australia provided prolonged periods of support to sole parents with very few work conditions attached, and subsequently their benefit dependency was high. More recently, the age of the youngest child at which parents are entitled to income support without them having to be available for full-time work and/or training was decreased. Australian policy should continue to support work, training or job search requirements for recipients of sole-parent benefits.

Despite above average public expenditure on families, Australia spends less on childcare services than most OECD countries: 0.4% of GDP compared with the OECD average of 0.6%. This has contributed to low childcare enrolment rates for young children, with only 40% of children aged less than six years enrolled in formal childcare. Australia should consider extending its childcare support programmes to provide more help to working parents.

Australia does well for most of its children as measured by outcomes within the three key dimensions of material well-being, education and health. The child poverty rate has fallen over the last 10 years and is now below the OECD average, PISA reading scores are above the OECD average, older children are less likely to be out of education or employment, and the incidence of infant deaths has also seen a large decline.

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